

For the Biggest Onions, Plant Early

The earlier you get your onions in the ground in the spring, the better the chance they will have to grow nice big bulbs. Onions can be grown three ways: from bulbs, also known as "sets;" from smaller transplants (young, non-bulbing onion starts); or from seed. Whichever method you choose, you can plant onions as soon as the soil is dry enough to work.



March through April is a good time to plant summer harvested onions in most areas of the foothills. Onions are biennial plants, meaning they take two years to reach the flowering and seed setting stage. Onions store food the first year in the bulb and, if left unharvested, will bloom and set seed the second year of growth. Bulbing generally begins in long-day onions when there is about 14 hours of light per day. If you plant your onions in the early spring, they will be fairly large plants when the days get 14 hours long. Large bulbs will result. If you wait to plant your onions until the end of April, when days reach 14 hours, bulbing will begin immediately and small pearl onions will result.

Buy and plant onion sets early while they are firm and dormant. Onions can be harvested early for use as green onions, or they can be left to grow until late summer for mature onions. Plant transplants as soon as you get them, and look for plants that have not been damaged by decay or excess drying. After purchasing onion sets, sort them by size into two groups – those smaller than a dime and those larger. Use the larger sets for green onions because they may flower early and not produce a good dry bulb. The smaller sets will produce large dry bulbs, since there's little chance they'll go to seed early.

For scallions or small green onions, plant the sets 1 1/2 to two inches deep and an inch apart. They will be ready for eating in about a month when the tops reach eight to 10 inches. For larger onions, plant the sets about a half-inch deep and four inches apart. Plant transplants three to four inches apart in rows 12 to 15 inches apart. Onions are shallow-rooted. If allowed to dry out, they bulb early and small size is the result.

Stop watering your onions when they reach the desired size and the tops have begun to fall over. Harvest them when most of the tops are down. Sun-cure them for at least a week before storing to make them last longer.

Onions respond to both compost and commercial fertilizers. A handful of complete fertilizer, such as 16-16-16, applied along the row at planting time will get the plants off to a good start. A good compost or organic fertilizer will also supply the needed nutrients for onions.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact the Farm Advisor's office at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or 754-6477 with your agricultural questions. Talk to a certified Master Gardener every Wednesday, 10:00-12:00, 754-2880.